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Creative Nonfiction: The Memoir

***12 Going On 21***

I was twelve years old, for Christ’s sake.

In my mind, my thoughts were those of a child. I was in the fifth grade at the time, but I wasn’t one of those preteens people are appalled by nowadays. I was definitely not one of those girls that have a huge pregnant belly while their face is dotted with pimples from the onset of puberty.

At that age, I was still playing with Barbies and baby dolls. I led a sheltered childhood, the result of my overprotective parents’ habitual foreboding of me to do anything dangerous or immoral. I wasn’t stupid or ignorant as a child, but I was naïve, as green as an unripe tomato. I was as innocent as the day I had been born. I had never even seen a penis on television before, much less in reality.

I wasn’t allowed to watch rated R movies or spend time with boys alone. The only place I ever went was my best friend Laura’s house, to swim in her pool in my one piece bathing suit. I only went to the movies with my parents and little brother. God forbid my parents let me grow up too fast. No, I was still a perfect child.

My chestnut colored hair hung in long stringy lengths down my tiny back. It had never been dyed, the way it remains to this day. My parents had refused when I asked them if I could put highlights in it, saying, “Your hair is so pretty. I don’t know why you would want to mess it up.”

Eventually, I began to like my hair color, and I never changed it, even after I reached adulthood and could make my own decisions. I had long straight bangs that laid flat against forehead, and a middle part from my scalp to the front of my head. The only way I ever had my mother fix my hair was in a long braid down my back or pig-tails. I didn’t realize then how childish it looked, but I doubt I would have cared.

I wore Levi’s jeans and Tommy Girl shirts; that was all my older cousin would wear, and all of her clothes got passed down to me when she outgrew them. I cherished those used clothes, excited every time my aunt would drop a new garbage bag full of items off. I would rip open the bag, pulling out each article and holding it close to me like it was a treasure.

I had no interest in makeup; I had heard once that it was made out of bat poop, and for the life of me, I did not understand why women would want to put it on their face. I thought it was disgusting. The only time I would consent is if I had a zit pop up from the onset of puberty, and I would have my Mom would dab a little powder on it. Looking back at my childhood pictures now, the zits were still visible, but I had felt better about them at the time.

Being a child, dressing like one, behaving like one, even thinking like one, apparently wasn’t enough to detract attention from my slender, willowy frame, long slim legs, bubble butt, and C cup breasts. I didn’t understand then why my Mom made me wear a training bra at the beginning of the fifth grade. We didn’t even see the puberty video until later on that year.

When we finally did get to see the video, it was a huge ordeal. The teachers split the boys and girls up into different rooms and showed them different videos. I remember the girls saying, “ewww” and “gross” whenever the narrator talked about women starting their menstrual cycles. I just slunk further down into my chair, knowing that I was the only girl in the class that had started her period.

My period came when I was ten. I was in the bathroom at my Nana’s house and I screamed for my Mom to come in there. She had already talked to me about the natural cycle of a woman’s body. She knew I would start early, noticing the nubs beginning to protrude from my chest. Still, I was shocked and afraid that I was dying the first time I saw blood stains on my white cotton underwear.

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Living in a small town of 401, everyone knew everyone else, and it was only courteous to greet an acquaintance with a smile and a “hello.” It was not plausible to get and out of the local convenience store in a hurry, without seeing and stopping to talk to someone you knew.

He was at least in his sixties, with gray hair, liver spots on his huge hands, and a gigantic belly that reminded me of Santa Clause. I always expected the buttons of his shirts to rip off, revealing whatever he wore, or didn’t wear underneath. His big round eyes were always tired and bloodshot, the effect of getting older, I assumed. The round bulbous man was the deacon at my family’s church. His daughter was married to the youth minister. My Momma had grown up and went to school with his daughters. He and his wife had given my Momma the Coca-Cola salt and pepper shakers she so adored at our housewarming party.

Their family had lived in the same old wooden house on the hill for years on the West Road. It was always visible from my Nana’s around Christmastime, with strings of colorful lights making it sparkle in the distance. Everyone I knew, I included, just called him Phil.

My family visited Phil’s house on one occasion for a church gathering. While sitting in the musty, mothball smelling living room, my young eyes panned the room for anything to keep my attention. I stopped on an old black and white photograph of Phil and his wife. He was young in the photograph, maybe in his early twenties. His smiling bride sat next to her soldier, hair curled, a smile rimmed by dark lipstick. He wore a military uniform, and was handsome in the way most young men are in old photographs. I found it hard to believe that the fat old man sitting in the recliner across the room had once been that vibrant young man.

I was sitting at the kitchen table at my Nana’s house, listening to her and my Momma’s incessant chatter. I always listened and never interrupted. I was content just to be allowed to hear adult talk. Somehow, along the endless flow of conversation, Phil’s name was brought up. Nana said, “He was a ladies’ man when he was younger. He cheated on Kathy all the time. The whole town knew it.”

Hearing that statement saddened me. I had always thought Phil was an upstanding Christian man, and I had assumed that he had always been that way. I never really looked at him the same after that. I lost a little respect for him.

“You sure are a pretty little thing; if I was just fifty years younger…” Phil would always trail off. My parents would chuckle, knowing that Phil meant it in the way old men compliment young girls. I would just smile, and not say a word. It embarrassed me, and disturbed me, for reasons I could not articulate at that young age. I wondered, “You would what if you were just fifty years younger? Date me?”

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Everyday after school, my Momma would take my younger brother and me to Jane’s store to pick up a slice of Hunt’s Brothers cheese pizza, Doritos, and Gatorade. Then we would go my Nana’s and sit at her kitchen table and do our homework while we ate. Phil often sat in the store on a red milk crate, socializing with everyone that came through the doors. He always had a pocketful of candy, usually Dubble Bubble gum, to give out to the kids after school. I always thought that was a sweet thing for an old man to do.

This particular day was no different than any other. My Momma picked my brother and me up from school and took us to the store. I immediately spotted Phil’s old white GMC truck sitting in the parking lot. Momma handed me some cash and told me what she wanted. I went in the store by myself that day. As I got out of the car, I remember Momma saying, “Now, don’t forget to give Phil his hug and he’ll give you a piece of candy.”

I did as I was told, being a painfully obedient child, even though I had become uncomfortable hugging him for quite a while. I walked up to Phil with a friendly greeting, just like always. He may have asked about school or my day. To be honest, I don’t really remember exactly what he said. He hugged me like the always did, much too tightly, my tiny body pressed up against his big one. I felt as if I were suffocating, my huge breasts smashed against the belly of this big man. I was repulsed by it, but did the polite thing and did not pull away until he did.

Phil looked down at me, his eyes hungrily growing as round as saucers. I looked down to follow his line of vision to… my chest. I was mortified, and in shock. I just stood there, unable to move or think or breathe. Then he said, “You’re getting big.”

I murmured something that resembled “yeah” under my shallow breaths. Still I stood there, unmoving. I vaguely remember Phil’s left hand, the one he wore his wedding ring on, slowly moving towards me. This alien appendage of a man I had trusted was headed to my right breast, and I was completely at a loss at how to stop it. I stood frozen in place, an ice sculpture numb from all emotion, as Phil placed his sausage like left fingers on my breast and cupped it. He squeezed once, closing his reddened eyes, and opened them a moment later to find a look of panic upon my face. He let go quickly; I backed away, unable to say a damn thing.

I scrambled to gather the items I needed and pay for them, getting out of the store as quickly as possible.

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When I got to the car, my mother saw the pained expression I had tried to hide on my face. She asked, “What’s wrong?”

It was the first time I had ever deliberately lied to my Momma, my best friend, my greatest secret keeper. I just said, “Nothing.”

She gave me a skeptical look, but let it go. I thought about the incident in the store the rest of that day, but all I wanted to do was forget about it. That night in bed, I couldn’t sleep. I tossed and turned in my covers until about 2 am, when I finally trudged up the stained carpet stairwell to the living room, where Momma was still awake. She always waited up for Daddy to get home when he worked nights.

I broke down and told my Momma everything. I told her how Phil had made me uncomfortable for a long time by hugging me too tightly. Even as young as I was, I knew that it was inappropriate, and that he was just trying to brush up against me. I told her about what had happened in the store that day, down to every last detail. She cried and held me in her arms, trying to protect her baby girl. She apologized for telling me to hug Phil that day. I knew that she, or anyone else, for that matter, could not have known what was going to happen. I know she blamed herself for trusting a man that was not family around her children, but I didn’t blame her. We were a tight knit community. No one ever expected something like that to happen to their child.

We called my Daddy at work after Momma and I were done talking. We told him everything as well. The only way I know how to describe how mad Daddy was is to compare him to one of those psychotic redneck fathers that carry guns around, shooting at anything that comes within twenty yards of their daughters. He called Phil that very night.

Daddy threatened Phil, saying, “If you ever come around my daughter or any of my family again, I will kill you! Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Raymon, I’m so sorry,” Phil responded.

My parents and I had a talk that night when Daddy got home from work. He paced the floor nervously, talking to me about what had happened. He asked, “Do you want to press charges?”

I didn’t. I just wanted to forget that this had ever happened. I wanted to move on with my life. I didn’t want any of my friends or anyone at school to know what had happened. I just never wanted to think about it again.

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From that day on, I never saw Phil in town hanging around the store. His red milk crate sat in the floor, uncreaking from his heavy weight on it the way it used to. I never missed him. I was glad I did not have to face the man that had betrayed my trust. I heard rumors, of course. I heard he rarely left his house and had become a recluse. His daughter confided in my Momma one night at the church’s youth center. “Dad doesn’t go anywhere, do anything anymore. He won’t even go sit at the store the way he used to. I’m worried about him.”

My Momma just sort of nodded her head and offered no consoling words for Tammy. I was glad she didn’t betray me by revealing my secret. Only my family knew.

I never stayed angry. I believed in the goodness of people. I loved God more than anything, and my heart burned with passion for Him. I suppose it was because of my love of God and willingness to forgive that I never held a grudge against Phil. To this day, even when my relationship with God isn’t where it needs to be, I still hold no animosity towards Phil. I was a child, and having an innocent heart, overcame.

Phil died a couple years after the incident in the store. I felt bad for his wife and daughters, his grandchildren. I still see his granddaughter and wife on occasion on my trips back to Mount Pleasant. I still talk to his wife when I see her. She is still one of the sweetest ladies I have ever met. She would have to be to put up with everything her husband put her through. My brother and his granddaughter are in the same class and are pretty good friends. He doesn’t hold anything against her, but he knows too.

Before the incident with Phil, I trusted everyone that I met completely. I welcomed new people into my life without thought or consequence. After the incident, I learned not to be so easily manipulated. I had trouble trusting men other than those in my immediate family. I grew up hoping that what had happened would not affect me in any way. It did, though. As a teenager, I would get nauseous when a horny boy would cop a feel or come on too strong. I never liked being objectified. An old boyfriend used to get mad because I never wanted to touch him. I was terrified of the male body. The penis and everything about it was foreign to me. I hadn’t the slightest idea of what to do with it. That old boyfriend eventually broke up with me because of it.

I suppose that the bad experience with Phil had a positive outcome. I learned not to trust everyone, even people I think I know. I was forced to grow up and abandon my childhood mindset, in a sort of twisted way, because of Phil. I always am skeptical when meeting new people, and tend to see the worst in them now. I’m not bitter, however. I’m just more grown up. I know what to look for when it comes to horny old men. I just stay away from them, even though I’m twenty-one now.

Today, I’m happily married with the man of my dreams. The only time Phil crosses my mind is when I see one of his family members around town. I don’t get nauseous when a man comes close to me anymore. As for my husband, when he gets that hungry look in his eye, the first place I run to is the bedroom. But then again… he’s more of an ass man.